



# COMPREHENSIVE CONDITIONS ANALYSIS REPORT

PREPARED FOR: CITY OF NORWALK, CT



SEPTEMBER 2021  
PREPARED BY LED BY US & ASSOCIATES



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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

*By working with the community to take action now, city leaders can make measurable strides toward a more inclusive and inviting Norwalk.*

With the death of George Floyd in May 2020 spurring national debate, Norwalk has also confronted increased tensions and concerns about human rights, civil rights, and the safety of community members who have experienced discrimination based on race, ethnicity or economic status.

The City of Norwalk reaffirms its commitment to strategies and practices that celebrate diversity; foster a sense of community and belonging; and increase trust, understanding, connectedness and respect among people from all backgrounds.

In the summer of 2020, upon the recommendation of Norwalk's Office of Community Services, the Mayor's Office officially announced the concept of establishing a Norwalk Equity and Justice for All Commission that will represent the diverse voices of residents to project equitable outcomes within local government and external opportunities that benefit all communities.

In March 2021, after a rigorous RFP process, the city selected the consulting firm of Led By Us & Associates to assist in defining a framework, methodology, tools, and resources to help drive the establishment of this new commission. The Norwalk Speaks! campaign was officially launched on May 22, 2021, kicking community outreach and engagement efforts.

*Norwalk Speaks! is a community driven action plan to ignite a more welcoming, inclusive, & equitable city for all residents.*

Key objectives for this scope of work were to:

- Facilitate a community stakeholder analysis
- Identify a list of organizations and people to recommend for the Equity and Justice for All Commission
- Build awareness and make recommendations to advance racial justice and equity by generating collaborative ideas, and best practices for transformation

*Recommendations in this report are based on qualitative input received from the community, research of past actions of the city, best practices identified from leading institutions, and the professional expertise of the Led By Us team.*

The success of Norwalk Speaks! was rooted in participation and relationship-building. Through stakeholder engagement across Norwalk communities, interviews and meetings with city staff, key partnerships with community providers, and interaction with local residents and leaders, the consulting team was able to gather input and cross-reference with best practices, as well as previous recommendations made through prior city planning activities.

The consulting team introduced Strategies in Action for Communities (SiAC) as a framework for solving mutual problems in a collaborative format. This framework uses eight conditional lenses, to assess how the city can manage immediate and emerging conditions in a way that best leverages its strengths, opportunities, and risks.

The SiAC approach works because it allows all participants to be their authentic selves, regardless of point of view, biases and correctness. Stakeholders share their experience of each condition through their own perspective or lens. In Norwalk's conditions analysis, Led By Us documented shared values and common themes impacting the communities sought community input for problem solving strategies.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY *cont.*



Conditions that were amplified by multiple stakeholder groups were noted as potential problems that can be met with collaborative solutions. Along the way, we encountered what is known as “Wicked Problems,” which are areas of concern so complex they seem impossible to solve and require long-term strategies.

The objective of this analysis report is to identify conditions that can be managed by implementing small action plans with varying degrees of effort. These are surface-level opportunities that key leadership can embark on now, with the support of collaborative partners that have been identified in the stakeholder analysis.

This document should serve as a guide to implementing catalytic action that creates synergy and momentum throughout Norwalk neighborhoods. The collaborative nature of these projects promotes civic pride, enhances sense of belonging, and builds community beyond just buildings and streetscape.

The action plans that derive from this document must pull at the heartstrings of Norwalkers, so that the next generation views our city as an inviting, inclusive community for all regardless of race, color, creed, gender or socioeconomic status.

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

*With rapid growth and shifting demographics, Norwalk must take a fresh look at residents' needs.*



Since inception, the town of Norwalk has always been a collective of residents with diverse interests.

In 1913, the mass consolidation of present-day Norwalk occurred when the towns of Norwalk, South Norwalk, and East Norwalk came together to pursue more effective and efficient governance and infrastructure. The outcome was the adoption of a mayor-council government structure.

In 1921, the city was split into six taxing districts, adding what we now know as Rowayton. These taxing districts took on distinct geographic identities. Today, Norwalk residents continue to enjoy civic pride in distinct areas of their city such as Silvermine, Cranberry, Flax Hill and more.

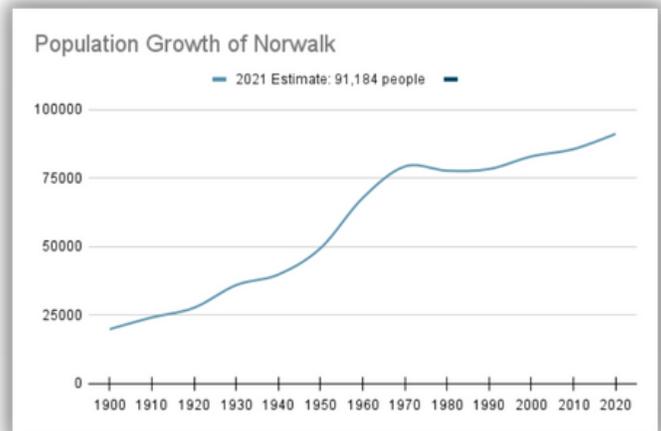
With civic pride in personal neighborhoods sometimes comes bias. As the city's population has grown over the last four decades, so has the diversity of its residents. The city has seen a significant increase in the percentage of Latinos, Asians, and Black/African Americans that now call Norwalk home. This has resulted in both a rich cultural identity for the city of Norwalk; and growing pains, as longtime residents see neighborhoods evolve.

Arguably the fastest-growing city in the state of Connecticut, Norwalk must now navigate new economic and community development opportunities. To achieve equitable and diverse solutions for sustainability, it is critical that city leaders take into account significant shifts in demographics.

### ***A city of flourishing diversity***

Norwalk's efforts to adapt to a changing racial identity are not new. But the search for solutions has now taken on a fresh sense of urgency due to an increasing rate of change.

***Over the past decade, Norwalk had the 7th-highest population increase in the state.***



Source: 2020 Census

In 1992, national civil unrest and local concerns around race relations prompted Norwalk's mayor to establish a Blue Ribbon Commission to explore the situation. At that time, the population of Norwalk was only 78,331, and 79.3% of the population identified as white. The Commission's report showed that in the decade-plus since the 1980 census, the minority population had grown in the city by 3.3%.

Twenty-nine years later, the town of Norwalk has experienced both significant growth and shifts in its demographics. Per the 2020 census, the population of Norwalk has grown to 91,184, the seventh-highest rate of growth in the state. This increase is mostly propelled by a significant growth in the Latino/Hispanic community, which has grown to 27.7% of the city's population.

Though white residents continue to make up the largest share of the community at 50.8%, this group has declined by almost a third since the 2010 census. The Black/African American community has increased to 14.7%, representing the third-largest population in the city. The Asian community rounds out the next largest group, at 5% of Norwalk's population.

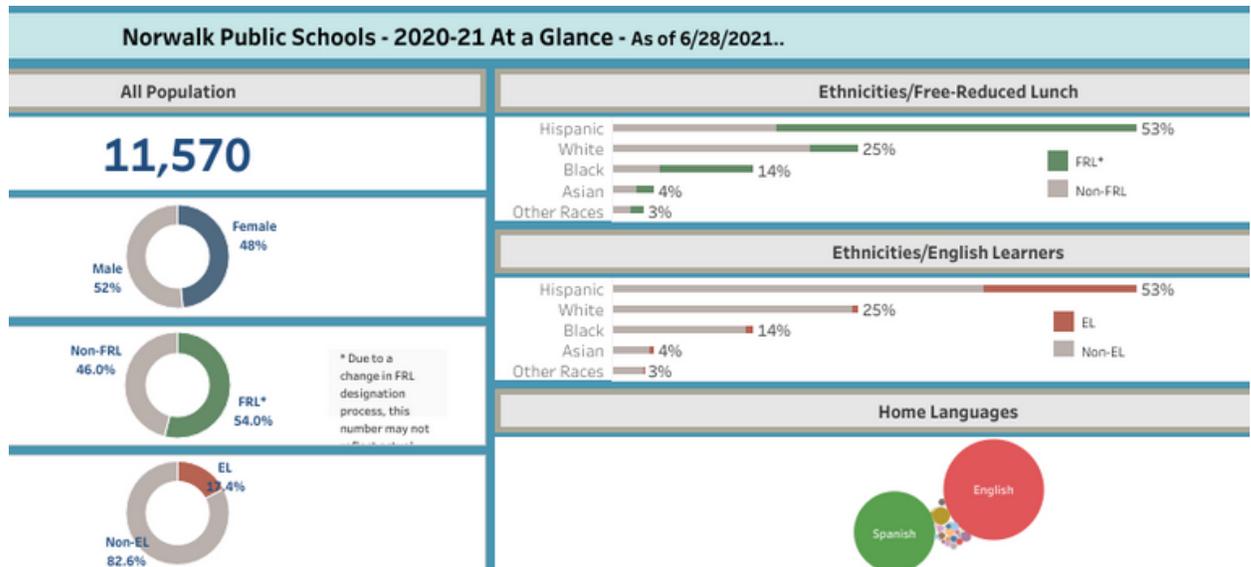
# INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

*Norwalk's demographics have shifted dramatically in the last decade, with significant growth in the Latino/Hispanic community.*



Source: American Community Survey (ACS) 2019, 5 year dataset

In addition to the current conditions captured in the 2020 census, it is also critically important to look ahead to emerging conditions. Data shows that though the Hispanic/Latino community now represents 27.7% of the city's population, it comprises 53% percent of the student body of Norwalk Public Schools.



*Hispanic/Latino students make up 53% of Norwalk Public Schools' student body, signaling a community on a growth trajectory. (Source: NorwalkActs)*

## INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

### *Responding to change*

What do these numbers tell us? First, they show that Norwalk is a desirable city, successfully attracting a diverse community that brings a rich culture to the locale. Second, these dynamic community influences are new to many long-term residents. They may find the call for racial equity and inclusion more alarming than ever before, due to a very human response: *fear of change*.

Yet an analysis of immediate and emerging conditions shows it is urgently important for the city to press forward. Population growth, shifting demographics, and national and local tensions in race relations make it imperative for government to leverage policy and action to drive equity and social justice.

The demographic data shows now is the time for the city to update its important role of being able to deliver core services and public administration for all of its constituents, and to level the playing field so that all members of the Norwalk community have a seat at the table in decision-making and opportunities to thrive.

This report is about building a sustainable future for the city of Norwalk. In the next decade, the city's diverse youth will begin coming of age. Today's students are tomorrow's constituents, local leaders and business owners. Securing the city's long-term economic and social vitality requires a focus on more equitable outcomes in areas such as education, leadership development, and business funding.

While many of the issues identified by Norwalk's Blue Ribbon Commission in 1993 remain to be solved, the city's demographics have shifted dramatically since that time; and so have the tools available to address these challenges.

Bearing this in mind, this conditions analysis report aims to take a fresh look at Norwalk's policy goals, initiatives, and results based on current procedures. The recommendations from this report are supported by best practices, lessons learned from community input, and subject matter expertise that will promote an equitable Norwalk that serves all.



*Common Council approved a \$76,780 expense for the artistic crosswalk at the intersection of West Avenue and Connecticut Avenue in September 2019*

## METHODOLOGY & APPROACH

*Assessing the needs of a living human ecosystem requires engagement across the community.*



The City of Norwalk seeks to improve race relations and implement equitable solutions for all residents. The project scope was to work collaboratively with the community to address a range of issues and establish the **Norwalk Equity and Justice for All Commission**. The commission's future would entail working with the community to address issues like improving access to government services; strengthening employment pipelines for people of color; developing stable and affordable housing choices; ensuring safe and supportive communities; and embracing generational diversity.

Exploring issues around equity requires listening to voices that represent all facets of the community to deeply understand unmet needs. Subsequently, it requires empowering those voices to explore solutions that can address those needs. Embarking on such collaborative work means first identifying guiding values; and then being prepared to acknowledge missteps that may have occurred in adapting to disruptions - for instance, a deficiency in adequate housing in response to population growth.

By undertaking this project, Norwalk has reaffirmed its commitment to promoting equity and justice for all through a collaborative approach; and its willingness to work with constituents to confront harsh truths with the goal of understanding complex problems.

### *A framework for dynamic planning*

Led By Us used the Strategy in Action for Communities (SiAC) framework to examine conditions in Norwalk. This strategic planning framework was developed by **Resilient Futures of Australia** to help communities evaluate disruptive change in a dynamic fashion, and identify ways to best take advantage of such change. This framework has been used to implore change in communities such as Stamford, CT, Providence, RI, and Hoboken, NJ.

A solid planning framework helps collaborative teams analyze issues, structure thinking, and communicate recommendations. It also helps align project objectives with potential results, and connects the community to the process so contributors can effectively share input.

The SiAC Framework is a rigorous, robust and tested process that helps communities shape and implement strategies that make sense in a rapidly changing world. In putting the framework to work for Norwalk, Led By Us explored:

- Immediate and emergent conditions that are (or could) impact the city
- **S**trategic **O**pportunities and associated **R**isks (SORs) present in those conditions
- Equitable value that can be generated by activating strategic opportunities at the right time
- Capabilities required to pursue these opportunities, and/or that will arise by activating a strategic opportunity
- Catalytic projects that will generate value and build momentum and synergy across projects

STAKEHOLDER GROUP	# OF ENGAGED ENTITIES
Non-profits	21
Faith-Based Organizations	4
Small Businesses	18
Norwalk Depts and Agencies	6
Civic Organizations	17
Individual Stakeholders	86

# METHODOLOGY & APPROACH

## *Project schedule of work*

Led By Us followed a defined schedule of work to engage diverse community stakeholders in discussions on improving equity and access.

1

### STAKEHOLDER ANALYSIS REVIEW

#### *Identifying & documenting community stakeholders*

Diverse sectors were identified for input: nonprofit, faith based, arts/culture, seniors/youth, civic organizations, small business, education, community members and government.

(April - May 2021)

2

### DELIVERY OF COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGY

#### *Implementation of a communication process*

The Norwalk Speaks! website and community app were launched to inform stakeholders about the project and engage them for feedback and participation.

(May 22, 2021)

3

### RELEASE CONDITIONS ANALYSIS GUIDE

#### *Implementation of common language guide*

A customized guidebook was shared across campaign platforms to define the process, key terms for shared understanding, and how to participate.

(May 22, 2021)

4

### COMMENCEMENT OF CONDITIONS ANALYSIS

#### *Qualitative data gathering across conditional lenses*

Conversations were held to document community perspectives and common themes across eight key areas that assessed current and emerging conditions in Norwalk.

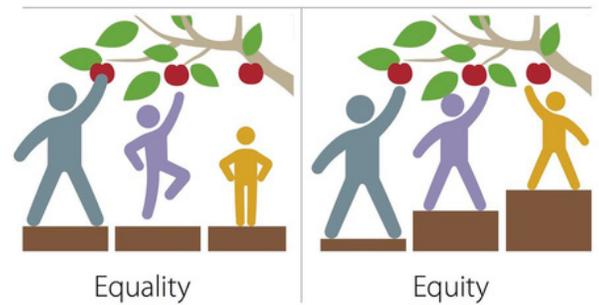
(May-July 2021)

# METHODOLOGY & APPROACH

## Utilizing common language to achieve results

In launching community engagement events through the Norwalk Speaks campaign, Led By Us first met with several stakeholders to introduce the SiAC framework, and to equip the community with next steps to ensure they were an active part of the process.

This included the introduction of a guidebook that defined a common language around such concepts as equity vs. equality. When presenting to constituents on the concept of equity - defined by our team as “the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair” - it was important to be aware that each individual may have their own narrative associated with the word. Providing context around the concept created a shared understanding of the stark reality that “equal” is not exactly equitable.



*“The route to achieving equity will not be accomplished through treating everyone equally. It will be achieved by treating everyone justly according to their circumstances.”*  
—Paula Dressel, Race Matters Institute

Equity translates into economic empowerment and access: to a proper education, to decent affordable living, to transportation, to the waterfront, and of course to capital via employment, banking, and other wealth generating institutions. In our conversations with community stakeholders, we began with the foundation that to achieve equity, it will be necessary to remove barriers of access for constituents who do not currently enjoy the full range of resources available in Norwalk.

## Gathering input through eight conditional lenses

The SiAC approach identifies conditions in the community by using a set of eight conditional lenses that reflect diverse aspects of residents' lives, from their daily surroundings to available opportunities. These conditions can be either immediate conditions, taking place right now; or emerging conditions, in the process of becoming prominent.

Participants sharing input were asked to give a qualitative perspective on how they perceive their community through each of the eight lenses. This perspective was not judged as either positive or negative, or whether it was perception or reality; but was invited as an authentic statement of how the participant experiences and engages with their community.



This conditions analysis report is reflective of stakeholders' point of view, gathered through a grassroots approach. The aim in engaging stakeholders and constituents was to ensure voices were heard through a fair, transparent process. Engagement opportunities were participatory and democratic in nature, inviting people of all ages and abilities to contribute to the conversation.

Qualitative data documented in discussions with stakeholders was analyzed to identify shared values and potential solutions; serving as a basis for action plans to formulate based the analyzed conditions.

# DEFINING THE CONDITIONS

CONDITIONAL LENS	DEFINITION
<b>SOCIAL WELL-BEING</b>	Health and well-being, lived experience of the people in the community, access to housing, depth of key social and social justice issues, overall quality of life
<b>ECONOMIC</b>	Employment vs. unemployment, types of jobs / industries, cost burdened, small business growth, affordability of goods and services, relative rates of poverty
<b>TRANSPORTATION</b>	Formal transportation system throughout the city, walkability, bikeability, new mobility systems, rideshare, connections with region, locations via road and rail, internet access / broadband, etc
<b>ENVIRONMENT</b>	Open space, air quality, natural amenities, exposure to extreme weather and other environmental impacts such as carbon emissions, Recycling initiatives, and clean energy options
<b>COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE</b>	Formal education, public education plus higher education, quality of the K-12 system, entrepreneurship education and informal education - including tutoring programs, life lessons from environment
<b>GOVERNANCE</b>	Transparent processes, relations with elected officials, public policy & procedures, public safety, civil services, and public administration
<b>AESTHETICS</b>	The senses of a place including art, culture, food, music, cultural diversity and other things that make a place come alive (or go to sleep), etc.
<b>BUILT FORM</b>	Development opportunities, quality of buildings and streets, opportunities for growth and adaptive reuse, mix of uses, streetscapes and greenways

***These lenses are paramount to the SiAC Framework. They provide clarity, context, and common language which drives community engagement and allows for all voices to be a part of the conversation***

## CONDITIONS ANALYSIS OVERVIEW & FINDINGS

Creating a more equitable Norwalk means assessing lived experiences across the community. A condition is defined the state of something with regard to its appearance, quality, or working order. We will now highlight the eight (8) conditions analyzed for a comprehensive understanding of Norwalk and the work that needs to be done.

Undertaking a baseline Conditions Analysis helps to establish a clear and shared context for making equitable decisions about strategic opportunities, and associated risks that must be mitigated.

Before jumping into the conditions, however, understanding the shared common values of the community is important to establish. Each neighborhood in Norwalk presented unique views but for the most part the sentiments of the community were aligned regardless of socio and economic status. Through this process, a number of key patterns were identified and are shared in the graphic below.



*Some common community values were shared across all neighborhoods in Norwalk*

## Social Well Being

Sustaining meaningful relationships within the community and feeling a sense of connectedness and belonging is a basic human condition that resonates with residents. Our outreach reaffirmed that most residents love the city, and the communities that molded them. But in any community, there's always room for improvement. Unlike other conditional lenses, the social well being of a community is difficult to measure because it is more qualitative than quantitative; a feeling of dignity and belonging, rather than a scale of 1 to 10.

In analyzing the social well being of the community of Norwalk, we looked at both the overall health of the community and the lived experiences of constituents. How do life experiences influence their day-to-day decisions and what is the impact on their quality of life? Understanding Norwalk's social justice issues, such as racial injustices, civil rights, and community policing, provide a foundational basis for tackling social problems that impact the vibrancy of the city.

However, it was evident that rising wealth gaps disproportionately impact residents of color, with a new wrinkle of mental health introduced. The stress of coping with rising costs in the neighborhood, providing for family, and navigating language access barriers that impede earning capacity are negatively impacting the emotional, psychological and social well-being of many Norwalk residents. While these issues are beyond the scope of Led By Us, we would be remiss not to mention this emerging condition that will require collaborative expertise to overcome.

In the area of equity and social well being, each neighborhood's lived experience and story was different. "It is a city of contrast," was a comment often heard from participants. Though some do acknowledge inequities, residents in areas such as Rowayton, Cranberry and West Rocks are living a better quality of life. Therefore, their narratives of being a Norwalk resident are positive. When we moved that conversation to South Norwalk and East Norwalk, the narrative became more complex.



*Themes emerging from the social well-being conditions analysis included livability, a need for increased communication and more quality affordable housing stock, management of gentrification, and a need for mental health services.*



### **Increased Communication**

Communications in all of its forms was a major area of concern for all residents and stakeholders. While there was acknowledgement of some communication from the city, overall it was deemed inadequate. Communications coming out of City Hall are perceived as "information only," and in most cases late or not complete. There are also complaints on where information is coming from, and where to find it. Although the city's website has a wealth of information, it can be difficult to navigate and does not produce real-time communication. The social media platforms do a slightly better job, but many times information deemed as not important, is not shared.

Residents and business owners want the ability to discern what is important to them, and that all communication from city departments should be shared across as many channels as possible. Obtaining buy-in through various forms of community engagement and putting that feedback from residents to use could be enhanced. Regardless of age or race, residents felt a more concerted effort should be made to increase a sense of community amongst all Norwalk residents.

When we talk about the well-being of individuals, we address not only resources but mental state. Part of the mental state is being comfortable with what is going on around you. The anxiety of not knowing information, or finding out too late, impacts decision making and produces a lack of confidence in the city's efforts for transparency.

## ***Increased Quality Affordable Housing***

Much discussion focused around the growing homeless population that is due, in part, to a lack of quality affordable housing, stable employment, and/or access to healthcare resources. As of the 2020 Census, Norwalk's poverty rate is listed at 10.3% of the population.

Community feedback suggests that lack of code enforcement contributed to the poor quality of local housing. Existing public housing lacks cleanliness and routine property maintenance, residents cited; as well as suffering from a rise in crime. The issue of quality affordable housing is a national concern. As such, there is no short-term recommendation to ease these challenges. However, we can look to several approaches taken by other cities to help combat affordable housing issues.



In 2016, Denver worked in partnership with state and local agencies to establish a Revolving Housing Loan Fund to create a pipeline of affordable housing development projects (Smucker, 2019).

An alternative to raising capital is addressing zoning regulations through form-based codes. This can help streamline typical zoning challenges. According to the Journal of Affordable Housing & Community Development Law (2019), Miami, Nashville and Gulfport, used various types of form-based codes to achieve their goals for creating more affordable housing.

Another approach used to address affordable housing is community land trusts (Decker, 2018). Unlike general land trusts, community land trusts are stewarded by the community, supporting the goal of community inclusion. In nearby Stamford, CT, Housing Development Fund (HDF) agency recently applied this approach, and has two affordable housing developments in the pipeline as of 2020.

## ***Livability***

Participants had many positive attributes to share about the livability of Norwalk. Most notably, transportation service is seen as both reliable and accessible. Other positive sentiments included management of the city's senior centers, and the improved social scene throughout Rowayton and South Norwalk.

Several issues were cited by residents that negatively impacted livability. Many expressed concerns about the city's growth rate and the rising traffic at key times of day. Despite solid remarks about transportation options, many are just car dependent to move around. For long time Norwalk residents, the inconveniences that this Norwalk growth has sparked is becoming more problematic for them.

Issues noted concerning city management and its impact on livability included increased property taxes, use of taxpayer dollars, and the cost of rising immigrant services. The tax burden on seniors who wish to age in place is of significant concern to that demographic.

Lastly, residents expressed concerns of potentially illegal contractor yards abutting residential neighborhoods, and a significant increase in traffic and noise they cause.

Growing concern around gentrification appeared in nearly all conversations. Whether through rising housing costs, an increase in concentration of wealthy white residents, or trendy new areas, residents were fearful of being priced out and displaced from their residences. For people with stable incomes making less than \$75,000/yr, they are finding the the market price for simple rental units is not sustainable for their personal budgets and consider leaving Norwalk for places more affordable such as Bridgeport and Stratford.

## ***Management of Mental Health and Wellbeing***

Many participants expressed concerns over the lack of resources, particularly in urban areas, that connect them to food, healthcare and housing. This lack has been exacerbated by the onset of the coronavirus. While there was acknowledgement of programs providing assistance, concern was expressed regarding efficacy of the programs and the need to provide a "hand up, not a handout."

## Economic

The economic lens is the engine of the conditions analysis, driving catalytic action in many of the major initiatives. This lens is the core of employment, unemployment, underemployment, industry growth or retention, small business access to capital, and how well the education system supports necessary career pathways to restore or maintain economic vibrancy.

Every community has an economy and industry within its own micro-ecosystem. What distinguishes one community from another and underscores the vitality of its economy is its human capital, businesses, community institutions, neighborhoods, arts and culture.

A healthy community is one that seeks out and puts to use best practices and innovative ideas around creating inclusive collective action, community engagement, buy-local campaigns, entrepreneurship, and business advocacy for creatives.

### ***Access to Small Business Resources***

Our outreach identified a burgeoning entrepreneurial/small business community that faces structural problems and barriers that inhibit business growth; and that needs more resources and support. Specifically, participants noted that Norwalk's zoning use regulations are discouraging and generally difficult to understand, and vary from zone to zone within the business districts.

Several business owners and residents who are exploring the possibility of opening a new business cited the added expense of lawyers who are required to help navigate these regulations, some of which date back to 1955. The negative impact of these complex regulations disproportionately impacts residents who lack the time and financial resources to effectively navigate these obstacles.

Many small business owners also expressed a lack of transparency in the permitting and zoning processes. There is a perception that a "connected few" receive preferential treatment when it comes to small business access and growth opportunities. Though Covid-19 has provided the city with the opportunity to be more transparent in providing accessible information – for instance, in the form of video – entrepreneurs still lack a small business toolkit.

There is a huge opportunity for local government to support networking within this community, and to enhance local entrepreneurship and education.



*Themes emerging from the economic conditions analysis include lack of access to small business resources and year-round work opportunities for youth; entrepreneurial burnout; unrecognized talent; and an education system that does not prepare individuals for the future of work.*



### ***Burnout for Social Entrepreneurs***

Norwalk has a strong, multi-generational entrepreneurial community. There is a committed group of social entrepreneurs already doing great things within the City Norwalk. But their passion and commitment means they are involved in many initiatives, and face a high risk of burnout.

When members of a community are burnt out, they are more open to look for new communities that will recognize and value their work. The entrepreneurial ecosystem in Norwalk is not strong or well-connected enough to transparently provide necessary support for scaling of small business, creating a risk that start-ups may move to other places rather than scale and grow in Norwalk.

## Youth Work Programs

Norwalk's youth population enjoys the opportunity to work in the summer. However, the critical need to keep such programs active during the school year was a recurring theme in our discussions. While local governments are not positioned to be the main driver behind employment of our youth, workshops that prepare young people for employment would be welcomed.

## Inadequate Formal & Informal Education System

Many participants shared deep concern regarding a lack of preparation for the future of work. There are significant gaps in how schools prepare all students for good jobs in the future workforce.

A red flag identified by Led By Us was that few participants understood what industries are strong in Norwalk, and what career opportunities exist. Only a few were able to make a guess on the industry that drives the city's economic vitality.

To ensure a skilled local labor market exists, it is important for both the city's leadership and the public at large to understand Norwalk's unique economic strengths and potential for growth in these key segments. Our analysis demonstrates a disconnect in this regard.

## Unrecognized Talent

Our outreach revealed immense latent talent in Norwalk, especially on the technical side of Art, Media & Production. When it comes to creative talent, diversity is a welcomed trait and difficult to brush aside. Local government can become a facilitator for helping to expand small business industries that can create and sustain jobs for the local workforce.

For example, the city is at the forefront of digital marketing and creative technologies, as a host of small firms in this industry call Norwalk home. A media exposition day could help attract larger companies looking for talent, align resources for smaller firms, create synergy around Norwalk's tourism assets, and spotlight talent that is here but not yet recognized.

While somewhat out of the scope of local government, through its relationship with the Norwalk Chamber of Commerce the city may be able to play a supportive role to help spark more cohesiveness in this area. With a bit of effort, new business opportunities can be ignited by matching resources and labor pool talent.

Finally, our outreach revealed limited leadership and human development. Most people would agree that a long and healthy life, access to knowledge, and a decent material standard of living are the basic building blocks of well-being and opportunity. Human development is a determining factor in the real freedoms of ordinary people to decide who to be, what to do, and how to live. Through intentional action in addressing disparities, local governments can help level the playing field so that all residents have the freedom to make the decisions they feel are best.



In analyzing transportation conditions, Led By Us assessed the ability of moving through the city using Norwalk's formal transportation systems. How easy is it to walk from neighborhood to neighborhood? What are bikeability and road safety issues impacting traffic? How accessible is it to get from Norwalk to other regions of the state either by rail or road?

With Covid-19, another form of transportation has proven to be just as important: that digital highway. What is the impact on residents who do not have adequate broadband service to access information?

Areas of focus in our transportation conditions analysis were walkability, bikeability, public transit network infrastructure, traffic volume, parking and internet access. Below are themes in key segments that resonated with participants through the transportation lens.

### ***Walkability***

Overall, participants felt that the walkability of Norwalk has improved significantly. However, they were in general agreement that much more needs to be done to increase safe and connected walkability throughout the city.

Participants noted that many sidewalks are in disrepair and there are streets that have gaps in sidewalk amenities. Lower-income areas are too often ignored when it comes to street and sidewalk maintenance and improvements. There was also frustration expressed with too many "roadblocks," including bureaucratic red tape, when a community tries to get new sidewalks.

Many participants expressed concern about dangers to pedestrians, specifically from speeding vehicles and/or negligent drivers. Those most impacted are Norwalk's lower-income residents, who frequently rely on walking and public transport methods. To meet their needs, it is necessary to ensure that safety is a priority, both by day and at night.

Residents who walk often expressed concern about properly-lit streets, indicating that proper lighting increases the perception of "safe streets." There is an opportunity to implement street calming measures to improve safety for all who rely on Norwalk streets for mobility.

### ***Bikeability***

Like walkability, participants also felt that overall, the bikeability of Norwalk had improved to some extent; but that much more needs to be done to increase safe and connected bikeability throughout the city.

Residents would like to see the City increase the number of designated bike lanes, and place them strategically to improve connectivity between neighborhoods. They would also like the City be more proactive about maintaining roads for both drivers and cyclists by filling potholes and correcting other issues that create hazardous traveling conditions.

Additionally, participants expressed that signage and other promotional information about bike lanes should be created in multiple languages.

### ***Public Transit***

Community members are largely happy with the bus and rail service in Norwalk, with a few concerns or suggestions for improvement. For example, while residents recognized that bus routes and scheduled running times have expanded over the years, they would like to see some of the buses run for even longer hours to accommodate early and late shift workers who depend on this mode of transportation to get to work.

One major area of concern local government can assist with is working with the Norwalk Transit Authority to address bus routes and times. The Led By Us team was informed that current bus stops have not been addressed in 30 years. With a significant change in population and ridership over this period, these stops should be reanalyzed to identify new needs and opportunities for improvement.



*Areas of focus in our transportation conditions analysis were walkability, bikeability, public transit, traffic volume, parking and internet access.*



### ***Traffic Volumes***

Participants have experienced an increase in the volume of cars and trucks on both through-ways and residential roads in Norwalk in recent years, particularly in lower-income neighborhoods. Some residents attributed the problem partly to traffic rerouting apps such as Waze, which direct drivers through residential neighborhoods to avoid congestion on main roads.

Several attendees mentioned concerns around particular roads like Hanford Place in South Norwalk, which is used by commercial trucks as a cut-through, thereby creating noise and air pollution for nearby residents. While commercial truck drivers are supposed to use designated routes to avoid smaller roads when possible, it appears to some residents that they are ignoring these guidelines.

### ***Impact of Transportation on Small Businesses***

An emerging issue identified during these discussions was the Walk Bridge replacement project, being managed by the State of Connecticut. This is a very large project that will have a significant impact on the public's access to small businesses in South Norwalk. In speaking to some business owners in South Norwalk, they were either concerned or confused about project timeline, traffic detours, and how they will or won't be supported during construction. Additionally, some respondents felt that the City's Parking Authority "chases customers and businesses away."

### ***Internet Access***

If there's one outcome over the pandemic that cast a black eye over systemic inequities, it was that the "digital divide" is still an issue for low income communities. Marginalized residents lack access to updated technology and the broadband speeds necessary to compete on the same level as their peers.

Some participants in the conditions analysis remarked favorably on the city's response during the height of the pandemic to ensure that school children had internet access. But long term, we understand that the disparate impact is still strong.

Broadband access is not just an issue for marginalized residents. In October 2020, Microsoft released nationwide research data on the quality of broadband speeds. In the Norwalk area, it identified the following percentage of residents who use the internet at broadband speeds per ZIP code:

- ZIP code 06850: 76.8 percent
- ZIP code 06851: 83.5 percent
- ZIP code 06853: 49.6 percent
- ZIP code 06854: 75.5 percent
- ZIP code 06855: 44.5 percent

The irony in this dataset is that zip codes 06853 and 06855 represent Rowayton and East Norwalk, respectively. Both neighborhoods are considered well-to-do by most standards and it's quite surprising to see that they suffer from lackluster internet.

However, for many immigrant families that we spoke to, access to the internet is limited to school and the public library. Any access beyond those mediums is at the mercy of cellular broadband devices, which are not conducive for long-term access and efficiency. Residents felt that more citywide hotspots would be helpful, and would draw visitors to specific neighborhoods.

## Environment

5.4

Our environmental condition analysis explored issues around residents' access to open space, air quality within particular neighborhoods, and health concerns associated with day-to-day pollution. The environmental lens has a significant impact on health and well being, which typically affects lower income residents disproportionately.

The analysis also took stock of Norwalk's natural amenities such as trails, lakes and beaches; and whether all are prepared for imminent shifts in climate, exposure to extreme weather and other environmental impacts such as storm surges that create flooding.

*Themes emerging from the environmental condition analysis included flooding, dwindling access to green spaces, heavy traffic, and health impacts.*



Although residents citywide love accessing Norwalk's parks, there is a sense from community members that the park system is not meeting its fullest potential. For example, an assessment of Norwalk's parks, determined that no park offers the amenity of a pavilion or shelter for larger group activities.

Additional feedback mentioned that some parks do not feel inviting to residents who are not from the neighborhood, which discourages access to green spaces and interaction with the natural environment. When asked to elaborate, participants hinted that race and color induced "looks of concern" and "insecurity" from what appeared to be frequent visitors of the park. This is a sensitive area because, justified or not, internal biases can make others feel uncomfortable, intimidated, and ultimately not welcomed.

### **Increased Flooding**

Many participants are concerned about ongoing flooding issues affecting multiple areas of Norwalk. The coastline has extreme exposure to storm surge and sea-level rise. Inland, the city transportation department has a good grasp of streets with recurring flooding issues.

Stormwater retention systems appear to be included in plans of new development, but this does not solve the issue of areas that have historically flooded. With an influx of new residents who do not possess this historical context, one helpful step the City could take is to publish problematic streets that should be avoided when there is a flood warning.

### **Access to green space**

Residents' perception is that too many trees have been allowed to be cut down, and the tree canopy of the city is dwindling. Many residents complained that new development has embraced "hardscapes" of concrete, asphalt, and pavers instead of greenways that would be better for the environment, street appeal and stormwater runoff.

### **Recycling and Trash Bins**

From both conditions analysis meetings and short surveys on social media, all indicators point to residents wanting to recycle more. Communities deem more recycling bins are needed in public areas, as well as trash bins with consistent schedules for pick up. The consensus is that many more residents would utilize trash receptacles if they were available.

Homeowners also wanted to know more about doing composting legally. The City of Norwalk does offer compost options and starter kits for homeowners. Informing homeowners about these options is a challenge that can be improved upon through a new communications strategy, which would have a wide-ranging impact for many of the issues explored in this report.

## Community Knowledge

5.5

The Community Knowledge lens explores how a community learns and retains shared knowledge. Landscape changes, politics and new developments in the dynamics of a community are life lessons that community members absorb from the environment, and are paramount in gaining a deeper understanding of the changing cultural landscape.

Community Knowledge also encompasses both formal education, and non-traditional ways of learning. Access to a quality K-12 public education system and opportunities around entrepreneurship training are critical for self-sufficiency and to provide options to traditional work environments.

### WHAT IS INCLUDED IN COMMUNITY KNOWLEDGE?

<b><u>FORMAL EDUCATION</u></b>	<b><u>INFORMAL EDUCATION</u></b>
<b>Public Education</b>	<b>Tutoring Programs</b>
<b>Higher Education</b>	<b>Lessons from the Environment</b>
<b>Entrepreneurship Education</b>	<b>Sports, Scouting and Mentoring Programs</b>
<b>Trade Schools</b>	<b>Museums &amp; Other Cultural Learning</b>

While residents did weigh in on use of taxpayer resources and public school curriculum, this report does not go into depth on the formal education system as Norwalk Public School's Board of Education has hired its own equity consultant. Rather, our main focus was on informal education and the opportunities it creates for marginalized communities.

Education is often cited as an equalizer to poverty and access to opportunities. In today's economic climate, the opportunities to learn are vast. The internet has evolved into a massive cultural exchange of ideas and learning tools for those willing to immerse themselves. Lifelong learning is essential for many who seek purpose beyond their traditional education years. For many residents with financial hardships, these non-traditional forms of learning have opened pathways for self-sufficiency and creative opportunities to be part of the local economy.

The city has a duty to explore ways to utilize community knowledge in decision making, as a tool that connects with people who have become subject matter experts over time by living within the built environment. There is value in this knowledge, and it must be captured.



*Themes emerging from the Community Knowledge condition analysis included concern over use of public resources and school curriculum, and segregation of community groups.*



### ***Use of Resources***

In Norwalk, the demographic shift to a rising Latino/Hispanic population and increase in Spanish speaking students in the K-12 system raises concerns about the number of English Language Learners (ELL) students in the school system, and the resources being expended to provide services. Some residents equated the rise of LatinX students with special needs that could drain the financial resources of the district.

While this may not be true, there is a sense that many non-Spanish speaking families view this as preferential treatment. This sentiment of backlash against immigrant families is a challenge to the goal of an equitable Norwalk, where race and citizenship status should not determine the quality of education nor dictate access to resources.

### ***A Community Divided***

In various conversations, it was explicitly stated that many community groups are structurally segregated, and hoard scarce resources. In many instances, the resources are information neighbors feel is not shared with them unless they are part of these segregated community groups.

These complaints may be perception only; however, throughout numerous interviews with leadership of various civic and community groups, the sentiments were validated by their recurrence and the number of participants sharing similar feedback.

As the city strengthens communications pipelines, ensuring that more neighbors are “in the know” will increase participation and utilization of community knowledge that can help reinvigorate neighborhoods.

### ***Curriculum***

Community conversations revealed a perception that public education curriculum should be revised to include the history of Norwalk, the contributions of all cultures, basic life and entrepreneurial skills, music, art, and sex education.

There was also a feeling that the current curriculum is not preparing students for the future, and that the career center and schools should be staffed with people who represent the diversity of the community and express sincere care for students.

Students themselves voiced opinions of feeling patronized. During “Youth Speaks” discussions, not enough time is spent understanding the needs of students beyond academics in the classroom. Young participants expressed that they do not feel a sense of support for extracurricular interests such as music, visual arts, or the performing arts. Outside of athletics, there does not appear to be the same level of resources or intent to help mold young people for future success through these pursuits.

## Governance

5.6

The concept of good governance is not new. However, for cities facing the challenges of economic decline and urban decay, its importance has been amplified.

The United Nations defines governance as a way of measuring how public institutions conduct public affairs and manage public resources in a preferred way. **Good governance**, by contrast, is defined as ensuring respect for human rights and the rule of law; strengthening democracy; and promoting transparency and capacity in public administration.

This conditional lens is probably the most important, because evolution can only happen through policy action, systems and process changes; and when leadership embraces such change. The culture of city government is typically shaped by its systems, and many inequities have been created over time through poor habits, outdated policies, and a lack of consistent self-assessment.

The practice of good governance is rooted in civic engagement through organized stakeholders such as neighborhood associations, revitalization zones, and empowered civic groups. Through thoughtful collaboration with the community, public institutions can reach solutions to a variety of problems in a just and fair manner. With strong leadership from the mayor's administration and an increasingly diverse population, Norwalk is in a unique position to take on such collaborative problem-solving.

Meaningful change requires that local government first “buy in” to re-establish trust with residents and stakeholders. Bold and courageous action must be taken through resolutions, ordinances, policy changes, professional development, self-assessment, and any necessary organizational changes.

Under the leadership of Mayor Harry Rilling, the city government has transitioned into a new organizational structure that has yielded cohesiveness across departments. Local government is now better structured to take on recommendations that will improve equitable outcomes for Norwalk residents and embed diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) measures within policies and procedures.

With an action plan in place that reflects this report, all government departments and staff can become enhanced assets for the community in the pursuit of good governance.

### **Diversity and Opportunity**

Respondents felt that appointed commission members do not represent the diversity of the community, and reflect an old “boys club” mentality. Likewise, city leadership and personnel is not diverse. Hiring practices may need to be examined, and a greater effort made to connect with qualified applicants of color when filling open positions.

Notably, the city's Fire Department does not reflect the diverse makeup of the city, and the community wants to see more effort in minority recruitment.

Both our community engagement work and background research revealed that the city's outreach to fill positions within the department with men and women of color has been questioned. This has been a consistent burden for the department to bear.

Additionally, minority business owners feel that the procurement and bidding process does not reflect

opportunities for them. Many cited the South Norwalk Mall as an example of being left out of opportunities, despite a collaboration between the NAACP and the City of Norwalk to attempt to increase registered Minority Business Enterprises (MBEs).

Without city staff in place to ensure that opportunities are indeed shared, multi-million dollar projects will continue to come and go without an impact on the minority business community. Per the Secretary of State database, only 11 MBE's registered in the city of Norwalk are considered Black/African American or Hispanic/Latino.

*Themes emerging from the governance condition analysis included a need for transparent communications, more diversity in staffing and procurement, community inclusion in planning, and increased oversight for policing.*

## Communications

Overall, participants felt that communications from city government needed to improve drastically. Our review of website, social media and print assets indicated that messaging across these channels seems to align. However, residents' major complaint is that the city chooses which information to share, versus simply being transparent on all matters that may impact Norwalk residents.

While Norwalk governance is considered responsive regarding initial issues, follow up results leave something to be desired. Citizens would like to see more tracking and accountability of stakeholder concerns, development projects, and other policy objectives.

The seniors population also noted a lack of communication through traditional methods such as print, newspaper, and radio. With a majority of the city's communications taking place via the web, seniors who are not technically savvy may feel left out.

Additionally, it was identified that communications should be multilingual and easy to access.



## Urban Planning

Many residents feel the city is being overdeveloped, and there seems to be a disconnect with economic development and zoning practices throughout the city.

Overall, there is a feeling that most community meetings in this area are "information only," and that community input is continuously disregarded in favor of city staff, developers, or both. There is a general lack of understanding about the process for development projects, leaving community residents frustrated and cite these as examples of non-transparency.

Many seniors felt that they are being left out of the city's future planning, and find aging in place difficult due to rising taxes.

## Policing

There is a high level of respect for the officers involved with the community policing task force. However, white residents notice a difference in tone and aggression when the Norwalk Police Department (NPD) is dealing with people of color. Additionally, there is a perception that NPD does not do enough foot patrols in neighborhoods and simply does crisis management.

Stakeholders wonder how much of the NPD budget is going into professional development for officers. There has also been an outcry for a police advisory board, citing concerns such as abuse of overtime and conduct-related disciplinary action.



## Aesthetics

Community aesthetics and visual resources can be defined as natural or cultural features of the environment that evoke positive sensory reactions and judgements in the observer. Aesthetic features like street trees and scenic views and cultural resources like libraries, civic centers and college campuses are an integral part of developing our neighborhoods.

While marginalized communities are typically under-resourced in this specific lens, intentional planning can incorporate and recognize the impacts of aesthetics in building community character. The City of Norwalk has a vibrant, complex and robust inventory of cultural assets that contribute to its aesthetic profile. The challenge is connecting these assets to promote equity and opportunities for all residents.

In addressing issues of equity and justice within the context of aesthetics, it is important to recognize that this is inherently interconnected to the everyday experiences and perceptions of each individual, as well as the community's shared experiences of art and culture. We considered it important to facilitate conversations within a setting that gave us access directly to shared "art-based experiences," that offered an opportunity to explore these individual and common perceptions.



*Themes emerging from the aesthetics condition analysis were a need for greater support for the arts, an increased focus on cultural sensitivity, and disparities in access.*



Using an interactive creative design tool called "The Game," we invited participants to build models of their ideas, perceptions and experiences so they could be shared with others. This allowed us to explore questions in ways that were more effective than just words, and to detoxify some sensitive topics in a more light-hearted way. Through this method, we gathered data that is very often missing from more conventional approaches.

## ***Support for the Arts***

Norwalk is a vibrant center for the arts, media, music, and other creative economies. The genuine feeling from stakeholders is that aesthetics locally can be a thriving economic engine, but is not properly funded with marketing and development dollars.

The success of these small businesses and programs add to the viability and desirability of the city. A 2019 study by the Connecticut Department of Economic and Community Development (DECD) determined that for every dollar spent in supporting arts, culture, and entertainment in the state, \$7 in economic value generation was attained.

The arts community is also eclectic by nature, organically embracing the full human spirit of racial diversity and inclusion which is a desired trait for all Norwalk neighborhoods.



**The Norwalk Art Space (Photo/Patrick Sikes)**

## ***Cultural Sensitivity***

There was a common sense that the city is often out of touch with the residents it serves. What typically is a mere oversight in delivering city programming can lead to feelings of resentment if the interests and cultural tastes of community members are not reflected.

For instance, participants noted that the Department of Parks and Recreation 2021 schedule of concerts were not reflective of the community make up, and only targeted an aging demographic. Respondents noted that Latin bands, Jazz, Caribbean rhythms, and more cultural diversity in the lineup would better reflect the full community.

## ***Socioeconomic Disparities In Access***

In every session where “The Game” was introduced, one common theme was disparities in the cultural resources available to people. While the desire to access arts, music, and culture is important to everyone, due to systemic barriers, it is not easily accessible to all.

There was a general sense that Norwalk is split by income and socioeconomic status - a sense of classism, as opposed to racism. Through play and dialogue, we confirmed this concept of two distinct Norwalks and lived experience, divided by the “haves” and the “have-nots.” Many residents who are dealing with job and food insecurities or substandard housing options can’t take advantage of the vibrant opportunities that the city’s aesthetic lens provides. The recommendations of this full report should benefit many residents and help level the playing field for those wishing to access many of these resources.



## Built Form

The built form of a city refers to the function, shape, and configuration of buildings in relation to streets, public spaces, and greenways. This conditional lens is often overlooked, because for many city residents, these are inherited conditions. Once the built environment is designed, people are conditioned to work around it.

However, there are opportunities for improvement in future design standards or zoning and land use practices. This is important because the built environment impacts our quality of life. Beyond buildings, built form includes infrastructure such as public water, electricity, roads, bridges, and transportation systems. The built form also determines the basis for economic development, opportunities for business growth, and the complementary mix of uses allowable with existing spaces and buildings.

### Streets and Sidewalks

In conversations with the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency and the city's Economic Development Department, it is clear that there are challenges to improving streets and adding sidewalks. Many areas around town do not have any sidewalks; and without legally compensating property owners for land to widen streets and add sidewalks, many historic Norwalk neighborhoods are difficult to improve.

The more urban corridors that have seen development are making improvements in street and sidewalk infrastructure, benefitting all residents and visitors in the community.

“Themes emerging from the built form conditional lens were street and sidewalk maintenance, delayed projects, scale of buildings, lack of green space, and historic preservation.”

## Delayed Projects

There is a general lack of understanding of the role of local governance in project management, and what is out of its hands when it comes to delays. Despite this challenge, it is important for the local government to find ways to communicate with residents and visitors alike about future and current projects.

The Walk Bridge program is a great example of a project over which the city does not have much jurisdiction, but which disproportionately impacts Norwalk residents and small businesses. Many employees in this area are low-income hospitality or retail workforce who do not have alternate revenue sources should they lose their jobs for an extended period.



The delayed Wall Street Palace development tied to POKO Development Partners, Norwalk Redevelopment Agency and Milligan Properties has experienced numerous issues including legal settlements. Though the path is clearing after five years of uncertainty, this delay has caused the community to lose faith in leadership, largely due to a lack of understanding of the complexities involved in development work. Impacted community members would like updates through a branded platform, where all involved departments and state agencies can deliver unified messaging to the public.

## New Development

One significant and unique element of Norwalk's built form is that, unlike other populous cities in the state, it is not dominated by a skyline of large buildings. Its urban corridors are historic in many instances, and have an architectural charm that extends the usefulness of those spaces.

However, Norwalk is not historically dense, and does not utilize much massing. Considering the absence of a skyline and the city's growing population, one common concern heard from residents is that they believe the city may be on the brink of overdevelopment.

### ***New Development (Cont.)***

Much of this concern focuses on housing developments dominating the cityscape. Most of these new buildings are using a “five-over-one” design which typically features a ground floor of commercial mixed-use space or residential amenities, with five stories of residential living above. For many accustomed to single-family residences dominating the landscape, these new structures can be intimidating.

It is very important for city planning, along with developers, to examine not only guidelines for these new structures but the ever important “built form” and visual relationship with the area to consider how these developments interact with existing residences and future amenities.

### ***Green Space and Public Spaces***

Another common theme heard from residents from all neighborhoods is a lack of parks, tree canopy, green spaces and public spaces for children and families to enjoy. Although Norwalk boasts some beautiful assets such as Calf Pasture Beach and Cranberry Park, the sentiment from residents is that most parks are neighborhood-centric and do not appeal to residents from denser areas.

While there are serious equity concerns here, many issues are due to misconstrued information and residents not feeling a sense of belonging. Residents want to feel a connection to these open spaces, and for many with gentrification concerns, they do not perceive neighborhood improvements as designed with them in mind.

One example is Ryan Park in South Norwalk, which was completely redesigned in 2019 and boasts wonderful playground structures, a basketball court, splash pad, walking paths and unique seating areas. The remodeled park complements many housing developments and other investments in the neighborhood.

However, for many members of the South Norwalk community who have called the area home for ten or more years, the changes are so drastic that they feel these public spaces are not to be enjoyed by them and have been built for visitors or new Norwalk residents planting roots in the area.

### ***Historic Preservation***

One final area of community concern was the notion that Norwalk’s city government does not appreciate the history of the city or its building assets. For example, many pointed to the Wall Street area, which has had many buildings decay.

In the 1950s, Norwalk residents fought to preserve the SONO Washington street area from demolition. Today, that has proven a wise decision and the area has become a symbol of cultural vibrancy and small business success. Many wonder if other parts of town can equally be preserved.

Regrettably, historic preservation is a costly and collaborative effort that requires both public and private resources. There is a lack of understanding among the general public about the commitment required to undertake these efforts.

What we can not dispute is that historic preservation presents a sign of civic pride and sense of community. Adaptive reuse of historic places also increases tourism and economics for small businesses, and preservation is also good for the environment. Aging housing stock also presents a unique opportunity to rehab multi-family homes and improve housing access for all Norwalk residents.



## SUMMARY

*Through these Actionable Recommendations, the City of Norwalk can take small, yet impactful steps toward creating a culture of equity.*



The SiAC framework used for our Conditions Analysis is built on empowering the community to actively participate in civic engagement by gaining a deep understanding of residents' true day-to-day concerns. When interacting with constituents, we understood that there were issues which we could not solve; or for which we could not find a sole solution due to the complexity of the problem.

According to Horst Rittel's "Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning," these issues are known as "wicked" problems. A wicked problem is a social or cultural problem that is difficult or impossible to solve—normally because of its complex and interconnected nature. Wicked problems lack clarity in both their aims and solutions, and are subject to real-world constraints that hinder risk-free attempts to find a solution.

The wicked problems we have identified in Norwalk are not just local issues. These include issues like affordable housing, education, income disparity, poverty and racism - all of which meet one or more of the characteristics of a wicked problem.

The recommendations we advise here invite the City of Norwalk to take immediate action. Many of these opportunities for action derive from the voices of stakeholders, and their willingness to collaborate and get involved. Others are based on our evaluation of the conditions and best practices; and, in some instances, may have been suggested before in various forms through other city planning documents.

It is the view of the consulting team that Norwalk has the resources and talent to implement these recommendations, and to foster a renewed sense of connectedness.

To be inclusive is also about empowerment of the people. The recommendations are not intended for city staff and leadership to tackle entirely on their own. The following strategic opportunities align with the voices of the community and what they value; and the city should both empower constituents and stakeholders to make progress towards these recommendations, and leverage the resources of community partner organizations.

Because the future of Norwalk is rooted in the success of its residents, Norwalk Speaks! is a community driven action plan to ignite a more welcoming, inclusive, and equitable city for all. Community buy-in is created by involving constituents in creating a culture of equity that generates value. Capturing that value will be the task of this and future administrations.



*The recommendations generated through our conditions analysis serve as the foundation for catalytic actions. They will ignite excitement, create synergy, and complement other citywide goals while strengthening engagement and awareness of residents.*



Conditional Lens	Recommendation	Overview	Risk of No Action	Applicable Resources and/or Tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> </ul>	<p><b>Lead a task force to create a communications action plan that streamlines how the city receives and disseminates information, which could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Tools to organize and share clear and concise messaging</li> <li>• Developing a "one stop" landing page, microsite or app with a community calendar and links to local resources and city communications</li> <li>• Broader use of video to improve messaging and break language barriers</li> </ul>	<p>A leading theme identified in every lens is that community members feel disconnected from the City of Norwalk. Our analysis shows that adequate resources do exist, but more needs to be done to successfully communicate with all Norwalk residents.</p> <p>The city can accomplish this by addressing barriers and increasing sensitivity to issues like limited access to technology, limited education, limited language skills and limited mobility help close the communication gap. Broader use of video could be helpful, as visuals can be easier than translation.</p> <p>Additionally, while the city's website has a wealth of information, it is not always easily accessed or sharable. Consider ways to enhance the user experience for the general public.</p>	<p>Not taking any action will continue to undermine good intentions.</p> <p>Conversely, strengthening communications will build trust, credibility and awareness, and promote transparency that is highly desired by residents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Peachjar:</b> This communications suite currently used by Norwalk Public Schools is already a familiar platform to many parents, and may meet the needs of the city.</li> <li>• <b>CivicEngage:</b> Tools and services available through the city's Civic Plus website provider could be more fully utilized.</li> <li>• <b>City of Modesto Sample Communication Plan:</b> This can serve as a starting point for a communications task force.</li> <li>• <b>Vyond:</b> This video creation platform includes tips and samples for government communication.</li> <li>• <b>Community Providers:</b> Local stakeholders are willing to assist, and should be drawn into this effort.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> </ul>	<p><b>Utilize the Language Line translation service throughout government facilities to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Improve customer service</li> <li>• Remove language barriers</li> <li>• Decrease response times</li> </ul>	<p>All government buildings such as City Hall, the police department and the library should be equipped with Language Line. Currently, this is an underutilized resource within the city.</p> <p>The city can opt to install either dual phone handsets or video kiosks. Costs vary between these, but both assist with translations for basic necessities, all the way up to life-threatening emergencies.</p> <p>We also recommend proper signage in public spaces promoting the service. With several complaints from the Hispanic community about longer wait times at the police department for translation services, this becomes a great resource for effective customer service.</p>	<p>This is a service in which the City of Norwalk has already invested funds. Not expanding this capability demonstrates a city numb to improving interactions with residents.</p> <p>In a worst-case scenario, not taking action could have fatal consequences should a life-threatening situation arise.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Norwalk's Language Access Plan:</b> Reference this document approved on 03/12/13 for the city's current guidelines.</li> <li>• <b>Dual Phone Handset:</b> The cost of this option is approximately \$175.</li> <li>• <b>Touch Screen Kiosk:</b> These self-service kiosks also include handsets. Pricing starts at \$5700</li> <li>• <b>Norwalk Public Schools:</b> The district can be an expert resource for further dialogue about the efficacy and usage of Language Line, which it currently utilizes to communicate with parents.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> </ul>	<p><b>Document policies and procedures for public services. This could include a "How To" series with downloadable documents, such as:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How to register a business</li> <li>• How to appeal tax assessment</li> <li>• How to obtain birth certificate</li> </ul>	<p>Many policies and procedures for basic civic needs are not well documented. With some basic effort, equal access and distribution of information is an easy solution.</p> <p>Check with department staff on the top 3-5 items they deal with regularly, and look for ways to simplify the process. Navigating building permits, zoning forms, parking appeals, beach passes, business licensing, vital records, and appealing taxes are examples of items constituents would like easy access to.</p>	<p>This is an easy lift. Most of these documents exist, and are simply hard to find. Not taking action sends the message that departments prefer to keep things complex in order to serve fewer.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Dutchess County Best Practices Guide:</b> These best practices to streamline zoning and land use interactions for the general public can serve as a useful reference tool.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>●</li> <li>●</li> </ul>	<p><b>Foster equity through the arts by organizing concerts around town. This could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Latin Nights</li> <li>• Rhythm &amp; Blues Night</li> </ul>	<p>Many residents expressed the lack of representation at the Norwalk Summer Concert Series, and felt as though the music selections should represent differing genres of music.</p> <p>Expanding the concert series is a great way of embracing the diversity that is so valued amongst the Norwalk community. Representation matters in growing communities such as Norwalk that are experiencing a shift in cultural representation.</p>	<p>Failure to take action shows that the City of Norwalk does not listen to its constituents on areas where they feel better representation is needed; and reinforces the current negative narrative of "that's not for us".</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Parks &amp; Recreation:</b> The department is responsible for executing these community concerts, and can easily expand the committee to include more diversity in age and ethnicity.</li> </ul>

Conditional Lens	Recommendation	Overview	Risk of No Action	Applicable Resources and/or Tools
	<p><b>Enhance pride of place by drawing the community into public art. This could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Neighborhood Art” crosswalk installations or branded wayfinding signage</li> <li>• Hosting a design competition</li> </ul>	<p>The Rainbow Crosswalk installation at the base of Matthews Park sparked many conversations. The MLK “DreamStreet” initiative has a similar unique crosswalk planned as well. Crosswalks are just not for traffic calming and public safety, but can be a source of community pride.</p> <p>A citywide competition for five additional crosswalks or branded neighborhood signage could enhance both community enthusiasm and sense of place.</p>	<p>While there is no real risk to not taking action, it would be a missed opportunity to bring the community together along racial and socioeconomic lines, beautify the city and generate enthusiasm and pride.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Branding &amp; Wayfinding Guide:</b> This resource from RSM Design offers examples of signage that creates a sense of place.</li> <li>• Norwalk Arts Commission, Economic Development &amp; Public Facilities Departments: All departments would benefit and could be involved with facilitation of such a project.</li> <li>• <b>Local partners:</b> The city could also work with local partners such as neighborhood associations, artistic centers and the Norwalk Art Space.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Promote entrepreneurship and strengthen the local economy by supporting multicultural businesses in diverse neighborhoods. This could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase in annual funding for Main Street Program which provides tools and resources</li> <li>• Quarterly event to promote Main Street Program to community</li> <li>• Encourage “Overlay Districts” where relaxed zoning regulations allow for a mix of uses</li> </ul>	<p>The City of Norwalk has a diverse mix of small businesses that thrive specifically in the hospitality sector. But other goods and services are equally viable and necessary.</p> <p>Encouraging overlay districts that allow for a mix of uses promotes proof of concept for startup businesses without putting financial strain on business owners. Streamlining permitting processes will also demonstrate Norwalk is open for business and is equitable for all.</p> <p>Historically marginalized groups traditionally create wealth through capitalism, and have proven to be a game changer in closing wealth gaps between different races.</p>	<p>Failing to take action means discouraging small business growth beyond key corridors. Without such initiatives, communities may not have access to the amenities they need to thrive and be healthy.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Director of Business Development:</b> The department of Business Development &amp; Tourism could help facilitate such a project.</li> <li>• <b>Norwalk Chamber of Commerce:</b> The chamber could support this initiative and serve as a partner in organizing and promoting a quarter event to promote the Main Street program.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Create a sense of community and belonging by tapping into volunteerism. This could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Publicizing open commission seats and encouraging citizens to apply</li> <li>• Amplifying nonprofits and civic organizations that are calling for volunteers</li> <li>• Tapping young volunteers for future leadership on Norwalk commissions</li> </ul>	<p>People thrive when they feel a sense of purpose and connectedness. Volunteerism allows people from all backgrounds to come together for common causes, and teaches youth amazing interpersonal skills that can not be taught in a classroom.</p> <p>The Office of Community Services can help foster civic pride by matching volunteer opportunities with community providers on various projects around town. The next level in civic engagement is to prepare some of these volunteers for future leadership on roles on Norwalk commissions that interest them.</p>	<p>With civil unrest comes a desire to get involved and be part of something special. If no action is taken, this momentum may be lost and is difficult to attain again.</p> <p>Additionally, failure to take action could lead to a lack of new leadership.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Milwaukee Civic Response Team Case Study:</b> This white paper on the effectiveness of public-private partnerships in responding to the pandemic can provide helpful insights.</li> <li>• <b>Local Partners:</b> Organizations that may wish to partner with the city to boost their volunteer efforts could include Norwalk ACTS, Open Doors Shelter, Norwalk Community Health Center, Norwalk Mutual Aid, Youth Business Initiative, Carver Foundation &amp; Center, Cornerstone Community Church, St. Paul’s Race &amp; Social Justice Coalition, and Wall Street Neighborhood Association.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Enhance community engagement around economic development projects by promoting cultural charrettes. Goals for this include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understanding community values that should be preserved</li> <li>• Identifying design elements that can be incorporated into developments</li> <li>• Achieve community buy-in</li> </ul>	<p>Many residents in Norwalk believe its diversity is one of its most valued assets, and that the city should increase its commitment to learning about growing cultural ethnicities in the community.</p> <p>Incorporating these newfound values within the economic development process can achieve community buy-in, and help transform opposition of some projects into support.</p> <p>This can be accomplished through cultural charrettes. A true charrette is a multi-day process with three public review phases. It is not a one-time event that just gathers insight, but an intentional process for a specific purpose.</p>	<p>If no action is taken, the city risks being called out for gentrification rather than improving quality of life for existing residents.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Plan of Conservation &amp; Development:</b> This document notes the need for more community engagement in planning processes. It is echoed by the OCD of Norwalk, all TOD plans, and plans from the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency and Norwalk Housing Authority.</li> <li>• <b>Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) Design Charrette:</b> This project by Gensler Research illustrates how diverse perspectives can be harnessed to improve both the built environment and social divides.</li> <li>• <b>Community agencies and civic groups:</b> Partnering with community stakeholders can foster more robust and diverse participation in cultural charrettes.</li> </ul>

Conditional Lens	Recommendation	Overview	Risk of No Action	Applicable Resources and/or Tools
 	<p><b>Foster a sense of community and belonging by sponsoring family game events hosted by first responders. This will help to:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Bring people together</li> <li>Align shared values</li> <li>Improve relations between races</li> <li>Build trust between the public and police</li> </ul>	<p>Expanding on the National Night Out police initiative, family game events hosted by Norwalk first responders can foster togetherness across neighborhoods and help promote public safety awareness.</p> <p>Events like this are inclusive, and are an opportunity to share in cultural games such as dominoes and internationally recognized games like chess. Play can create a sense of belonging through simple exchanges of activity that can make a big impact.</p>	<p>Failing to take action to foster communal engagement will further reinforce bias, creating unintentional barriers in the community.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Norwalk Police Department and Fire Department:</b> The departments would be closely involved in coordinating such an initiative.</li> <li><b>Faith based &amp; civic organizations:</b> The city could partner with local churches and community groups to help organize and promote these events, offering both greater reach and a trusted voice.</li> </ul>
  	<p><b>Facilitate collaboration between cultural assets by initiating a Cultural Passport program. This could be promoted in partnership with:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wheels2U micro transit service</li> <li>Local museums</li> <li>Norwalk Public Library</li> <li>Norwalk Parks &amp; Recreation</li> </ul>	<p>A community passport program is a great way to offer all residents an opportunity to access spaces and knowledge about Norwalk's history and cultural assets. The program should create a Norwalk "passport application" that allows residents to collect stamps when they visit a location of interest.</p> <p>This could be turned into a game such as a city treasure hunt, with various prizes for participation.</p>	<p>If no action is taken, it is a missed opportunity to engage Norwalk residents in exploring community assets. If the community at large does not understand Norwalk's history and cultural assets, it could have implications on future decisions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Norwalk Public Library:</b> The library offers great cultural programming and could be a partner in creating the passport program.</li> <li><b>Parks &amp; Recreation:</b> The department could also help identify and promote passport "stops" such as the Lockwood Matthew Mansion Tour and city parks, and partner with Norwalk Transit District to include urban trails.</li> <li><b>Local museums:</b> The Stepping Stone Museum, Maritime Aquarium, Sono Collection and more could partner on this initiative.</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Recognize disparate impacts within the City of Norwalk's workplace by:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Conducting a DEI municipal assessment and Staff Development Plan</li> <li>Organizing professional development workshops around DEI standards</li> <li>Conducting a staff survey of workplace policy and procedures, and assessing improvement areas</li> </ul>	<p>Led By Us received several anonymous calls and emails during the project term with workplace complaints regarding racial sensitivity and demoralizing behavior.</p> <p>Acknowledgement of improvement needed in areas of diversity, equity, and inclusion is the first step towards progress. This is done by completing a self assessment.</p> <p>Resources exist from state and national entities to help municipalities conduct such assessments and implement improvement.</p>	<p>It would not make sense to expect fair and just outcomes from outside of city hall without first starting within. If the city does not take action in this regard, it risks ridicule for failing to alter its own in-house culture.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Connecticut Conference of Municipalities Racial Equity Toolkit:</b> Released in 2020, this excellent tool gives examples of racial equity toolkits that can be implemented for department-level decision making.</li> <li><b>National League of Cities Municipal Action Guide:</b> Responding to Racial Tension: This guide provides practical checklists, lessons learned and tactics for dealing with crisis and understanding racial dynamics.</li> <li><b>Long Beach Equity Toolkit for City Leaders and Staff:</b> This sample toolkit can serve as a model for Norwalk's efforts to create its own documentation.</li> </ul>
    	<p><b>Address the growing local housing crisis by implementing a citywide Affordable Housing Development Plan. This should include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Partnering with stakeholders to identify strategies to increase housing stock for working families</li> <li>Taking an inventory of properties in disrepair, especially within a mile of job corridors and public transit assets.</li> </ul>	<p>If they say equity begins at home, one must have a home to go to. Connecticut is in the midst of an affordable housing crisis, with Norwalk as its epicenter.</p> <p>The Plan of Conservation and Development did not adequately address affordable housing or any means to increase housing stock for working families. We highly recommend working with key partners to create a housing plan with earmarks to ensure that units are preserved as intended.</p> <p>Access to quality housing is a basic right and no one who works in Norwalk should be subject to being priced out and not enjoy the city to which they contribute. This is a rapidly emerging condition that needs to be addressed.</p>	<p>No real short term risk as affordable housing is a wicked problem on its own merit. However, no action plan to encourage rehabilitation of aging housing stock, or strategy for new development of accessible housing for all is detrimental to Norwalk's marginalized communities. Stable housing is the key to sustainable and equitable cities.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>Connecticut Department of Housing Affordable Housing Guidebook:</b> This 2020 planning guide was created to help municipalities implement affordable housing plans.</li> <li><b>Norwalk Economic Development Department:</b> The department should take the lead on this urgent initiative that is central to the city's economic wellbeing.</li> <li><b>Partnering stakeholders:</b> Economic Development should partner with other entities that share a common goal, including Fairfield County Center for Housing Opportunity, the Connecticut Department of Housing, the Norwalk Redevelopment Agency and Norwalk Housing Authority.</li> </ul>

Conditional Lens	Recommendation	Overview	Risk of No Action	Applicable Resources and/or Tools
	<p><b>Better represent the population of a diverse city by expanding the Police Commission. A recommended expansion could include:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seven members in total</li> <li>• No more than four from the same political party</li> </ul>	<p>Amidst nationwide civil unrest and public outcry for justice and equality, Norwalk is not immune to complaints against the police department. Despite the Conditions Analysis never highlighting the topic of policing, the topic of Norwalk's Police department was raised often.</p> <p>There were consistent conversations about mistrust of police, and lack of disciplinary measures for officers. Many citizens, regardless of race or gender, expressed a desire for a civilian review board for the police.</p> <p>We understand that not every negligent offense by an officer is indicative of the department as a whole. Based on best practices, we do not recommend a Civilian Review Board. However, an expansion of the Norwalk Police Commission is long overdue, based on best practices followed by other Connecticut cities.</p> <p>Expanding the police commission would be an equitable change to better represent a growing city with a population over 90K; and would help contribute to fair, just and balanced oversight.</p>	<p>Community members and civic organizations have scrutinized the city's 3 member Police Commission in the past. The city risks being insensitive to community input on policing and public safety matters. It also risks not being truly vested in racial and social justice issues. The message of taking no action can sabotage gains made in other areas.</p>	<p>This work should involve the Office of Corporate Counsel, Mayor's Office, Common Council and Norwalk Police Department. Other cities around the state can provide a reference for best practices:</p> <p><b>Hartford</b> has a Civilian Review Board</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 9 members, 2 alternates</li> </ul> <p><b>Waterbury and Bridgeport</b> each have a Board of Police Commissioners:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 7 members on each city's Commission respectively</li> </ul> <p><b>New Haven</b> has a Police Civilian Review Board:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recently established in 2021, has had issues with getting complaints to internal affairs</li> </ul> <p><b>New London</b> has a Community Relations Committee:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 13 members representing organizations and citizens that represent a population of 27K</li> <li>• In January 2021, its Police Review Task Force made a recommendation to establish a Civilian Review Board</li> </ul> <p><b>Berlin</b> has a Police Commission:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 5 members representing a population of 20K</li> </ul>
	<p><b>Increase diversity in the staffing of departments to better reflect the makeup of the community, with a special focus on the Norwalk Fire Department. This work should include:</b></p> <p>An update of the city's Affirmative Action &amp; Equal Opportunity Plan</p> <p>Closing the gap on 80% utilization standard of Minority workforce employment for specific jobs</p> <p>Special efforts to fill the roles of Technicians, Service/Maintenance, and Protective Services-Fire</p>	<p>The city's most recent Affirmative Action Utilization Analysis dates back to 2017, and community perception is that not much has changed in that time.</p> <p>The Fire Department in particular continues to have lackluster results in recruiting minority firefighters. In 2015, over 100 minority applicants took the written and oral test and none were deemed qualified to advance. How can this be?</p> <p>We advise the personnel director in conjunction with the human relations director to take a harder look at hiring practices and revisit job descriptions with the intent of attracting a diverse candidate pool.</p>	<p>Representation matters in both management and skilled positions within public sector jobs. The city is a major employer and economic engine for the city by default. Failing to take action contributes to inequality both directly and by failing to set an example for private sector partners by showcasing a diverse and inclusive workforce at all levels.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Norwalk Affirmative Action/Equal Opportunity Program Guide &amp; Norwalk Affirmative Action Utilization Analysis:</b> These two foundational documents, dating back to 2008 and 2017 respectively, must be revisited and enhanced.</li> <li>• <b>Urban Sustainability Directors Network DEI Guide for Recruitment and Hiring:</b> This tool offers guidance for writing job descriptions, outreach and the hiring process for employers committed to diversity.</li> <li>• <b>Hiring Toolkit for Local Government:</b> This guide from CivicPlus shares general tips for digital recruitment, interviewing, selection and onboarding.</li> </ul>

## Appendix 1 - References

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## Appendix 2 - Resources & Tools

Center for Policing Equity, A Policy Plan for Policing in America,  
<<https://policingequity.org/what-we-do/a-policy-plan-for-policing-in-america>>

Diversity and Inclusion Resources - Center for Diversity and Inclusion (CDI) - University of Houston." University of Houston. <[https://www.uh.edu/cdi/diversity\\_education/resources/articles/](https://www.uh.edu/cdi/diversity_education/resources/articles/)>

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Police-Youth Dialogues Toolkit, <<https://cops.usdoj.gov/RIC/Publications/cops-p321-pub.pdf>>

## Appendix 3 - Community Engagement Activity Matrix

Yellow - Community Discussion

Blue - Community Event

Orange- "The Game"

Date of Activity	Type of engagement	Hours Spent on Engagement	Target # of Community Voices	Actual # of Community Voices
5/26/21	Cornerstone	1.5	25	5
6/1/21	Zoom	1	15	1
6/2/21	Community Health Center Farmers Market	3	50	17
6/5/21	Artspace Grand Opening	1.5	20	23
6/16/21	Cornerstone Church	2	20	6
6/23/21	Ecolab (small business)	2	15	3
6/26/21	Interactive Norwalk Artspace "The Game"	2	25	7
6/29/21	Main Library	2	25	12
6/29/21	Mayor's Youth Program	1.5	20	6
6/30/21	Bethel AME	2	20	8
7/6/21	Roodner Court Food Distribution	2	25	33
7/7/21	Zoom	1.5	10	4
7/12/21	Norwalk Senior Center	2	15	8
7/14/21	Sono Library	2	15	4
7/15/21	Grace Baptist	1.5	15	3
7/19/21	District D - ZOOM	0.5	15	3
7/21/21	District E - Brien McMahan	2	25	10
7/24/21	Interactive Norwalk Artspace "The Game"	2.5	35	17
7/24/21	YBI- Basketball Tournament	1.5	50	31
7/27/21	Norwalk Senior Center South	2	25	22
7/28/21	Save Inc -Youth	1.5	20	15
7/29/21	District A & B	2	30	11
<b>TOTALS</b>		<b>39.5 hrs</b>	<b>515</b>	<b>249</b>